Introduction: the public letter, or la lettre perfide

I will ask you to direct your gaze away from the head of the martyred hero in the portrait, Marat Assassiné, and toward the letter in the hero’s hand (fig. 1). This move upsets the composition a bit: the artist has so carefully balanced the face of the dying man with the letter he seems to have just read. Yet our adding weight to that letter compensates for the extraordinary attention which, ever since the portrait was first displayed, has been awarded to the “Marat” half of Marat Assassiné. Acknowledging that the dying hero alone is not the central figure of the painting, we can then legitimately place Marat to one side. The figure already appears detached from its audience, in a separate time and space. The closed eyes and muted features convey a distant and timeless quality: the hero is immortalized, and beyond our world. More succinctly: he is dead. The letter, on the other hand, has a life of its own. It balances this transcendent image and reminds us of the historical context – the turbulence of Paris in April 1793, when Marat, the rabble-rousing “Friend of the People,” was murdered in his bath by a young woman, Charlotte Corday. The letter introduces us into its world and intrudes upon our own.

I draw attention to this image in order to stress the value of the letter not as a literary vehicle – the epistolary form – but as a figure from everyday life. Furthermore, I want to suggest that the historical, material role of the letter in the late eighteenth century was every bit as forceful in the art and literature of the period as was the formal epistolary tradition. The very idea of the letter, in David’s painting and elsewhere, produced representations that threatened to disrupt the sentimental tradition which promoted it. The emblem of isolation and vulnerability found itself in a powerful, public space.

To return to the painting: unlike the serene face, the letter – like the hand, the knife, the bath and the breast – is marked with blood. In contrast to the soft, composed features of the face, the written
characters of the letter seem stark, almost too real. The black “Marat,” underlined, opposes its dying referent: the written name stands in the middle of the page, but off-balance. In fact, the entire letter knocks the viewer off-balance. It tilts at an unsettling angle, mirroring the drooping head, but pulling away from it and toward its new audience. By means of the angle of presentation, the letter becomes public property. The clarity of the writing insists that you read the message. But to read, you must move – change your position, and tilt your head according to the angle dictated by the paper. By disturbing the viewer/reader, the letter upsets a portrait which would otherwise remain silent, immobile statuary. Thus the letter moves its audience to confront historical, even violent change.¹

Parisians viewing the portrait on display in the Louvre, six months after the assassination, would have known the more sensationalized circumstances of Marat’s “over-dramatic and over-publicized end.”² They would also have recognized the duplicity behind the cryptic – and ironic – words of the letter. Translated, it reads: “From the 12th of July, 1793, Marie Anne Charlotte Corday to the Citizen Marat. It is enough that I be unfortunate to have a right to your benevolence [or kind protection].” The face value of this letter is not to be trusted: what takes the form of deferential language hides the murderous intentions of Charlotte Corday. Baudelaire labelled it la lettre perfide – the treacherous letter – since, in at least one sense, the letter caused Marat’s bloody death. Corday had written to Marat, offering to serve as a double agent and betray to him the names of counter-revolutionaries. In agreeing to meet with her, Marat fell victim twice to the letter’s duplicity.³

Compare the letter to the other items in the composition: Corday’s knife, the pen she used, the bathtub, the inkwell, the head-wrappings, the banknotes on the writing-stand, the stand itself – these mundane articles have been transformed, as one critic puts it, into a still-life of “holy relics.”⁴ David has merged and transcended what, in his day, would have been contradictory traditions – the neo-classical and the Christian – but he has also created a saint out of everyday elements, and faithful to the daily newspaper accounts. Marat has become “the icon of a new religion” for revolutionary France.⁵ But our attention has shifted from the disturbing letter. Strangely enough, the letter remains off the critic’s list of “holy relics.” Perhaps because of its duplicity, perhaps because of its invitation to be reread, the letter
defies the process of canonization. It reminds us that flattery and suppiication can be treacherous, and that transcendence denies historical fact. In the face of the painting’s tranquillity, Paris would have seen tension and ambivalence surfacing in the letter.

What Charlotte Corday had written was not only deceptive, it was lethal. Marat’s own pen has fallen quietly, like a dying bird, dividing the painting into two areas: that of the immobile martyr and that of the written word. A second pen, however, defies the division he tries to establish. It mimics the bloody knife and, poised like a dart, threatens to attack the martyr’s breast again.

David intensifies the conflict between hero and assassin by adding a different sort of duplicity: he selects a small portion of the woman’s lettre perfide and renders it in his own handwriting. Perhaps he intended to restore the note’s tribute to his hero, to erase the irony and transgression; but the feminine adjective remains highly visible – malheureuse, unfortunate. Charlotte Corday now appeals to the viewer through that letter. Both the duplicity and the irony are redoubled. Corday silences Marat and David silences Corday, but the letter calls to its viewers/readers for the last word.

One transcription is not enough: the artist overwrites – or underwrites – the unsettling letter with an alternative one. Flush with the surface of the canvas, David’s tombstone-like inscription makes a directed letter of the entire still-life:

A MARAT DAVID L’AN DEUX

The upright roman capitals fight for an unchallenged immortality – upfront, direct and immediate. Like the flattering letter, the memorial inscription has a hidden agenda: in this case, to unite Marat and David in a correspondence which defies mortality. Nonetheless, like the letter, too, it cannot escape the stains of its history. When David invokes L’An Deux of the Jacobin calendar, he calls attention to the dating of the ancien régime, used by the Girondiste Corday. The “sanctified” immobility of the still-life and the unshadowed inscription must meet the challenge presented by that tilted letter, the challenge of change and difference. David’s neo-classical ideal thus calls up the mortal realities of contemporary conflict. For the letter of the malheureuse maintains the upper hand. Along its political slant, la lettre perfide introduces a context which the art historian, concerned with classical and Christian iconography, virtually ignores: how the letter represented certain imaginary
relationships, or “fictions” in the revolutionary period, which were public, political and powerful.

In Marat Assassiné, the art historian easily spots the allusions to classical and Christian models: the Ecce Homo of classical sculpture and the Christ-figure from baroque depositions and pietas are Marat’s forefathers. Across the intersection of classical and Christian traditions however, David adds a third dimension: the popular dimension of sentimental appeal. We see this appeal on the right side of the canvas – in the woman’s letter, the journalist’s banknotes for a widow and her children, and the tombstone inscription. We should recognize that these stock items of the age of sentimentality have become politically charged in the painting.

In one sense, I am asking you to read the epistolary fiction creeping out from behind the image of Marat Assassiné. We normally associate the letter tradition of the eighteenth century with sentimental heroines, seductive villains and long, tortuous romances. David himself read and admired Richardson’s Clarissa and Rousseau’s Julie. Moreover, he would have been familiar with an epistolary tradition in painting, where letters indicated interior spaces and female vulnerability, especially sexual vulnerability (see figs 2 and 3). In the face of such a tradition, I am asking that you read in this piece of revolutionary propaganda, the popular epistle made explicitly political. Charlotte Corday’s letter offers more than a figure of the melodramatic: it shows that the melodramatic covers over and yet gives shape to the contemporary realities of class conflict, sexual violence, social upheaval and civil war. Despite the victim’s composure in this portrait, France is in turmoil. The familiar letter of sentimental fiction has been unhinged, just as formal matters in France – customs, institutions, definitions – have been jolted out of alignment.

In its appeal to a heterogeneous audience, Marat Assassiné replaces the heroine of sentimental fiction with a political hero. Whereas the letter of the sentimental novel could invade the domestic and sexual privacy of its heroine, the letter of this painting brings the viewer into the private bathroom of the hero. In both cases, the letter serves as a letter of introduction: it gains us entry. Here, however, the woman deceives and the man dies, in a reversal of familiar convention. Note how Marat, with his exposed, vulnerable body, is feminized in his status as victim. His bath becomes a bleached version of Clarissa’s coffin, his own public sepulchre. And like Rousseau’s Julie, Marat
Figure 2 Jean-Baptiste Greuze, The Lute Writer.

Figure 3 Jean-Baptiste Greuze, The Kiss, or, Une Jeune Fille qui embrasse un baiser par la jambe, épiée par des fleurs, qu'elle bénit.

Engraving by Augustin de Saint-Aubin.
finds martyrdom in a watery grave, surrendering life for “the good of the public.” Entering along the lines of Charlotte Corday’s overtly conventional, but ultimately contentious letter, then, is the reality of the contemporary, popular imagination. And the contemporary slant of the letter introduces, across the two-dimensional plane of the classical/Christian icon, ideological and political conflict.

Ronald Paulson characterizes this third dimension of revolutionary art as evidence of an emerging subculture, “graffiti on the borders of the official.” The woman’s letter and the sentimental appeal do not rest easily beneath the formal regularity of salon-sanctioned or party-sanctioned art. They introduce not only popular culture, but the very voice of the masses who would view the portrait – the same disruptive mobs which could rise up to overthrow their own heroes. In a very particular sense, the letter carries the voice of a people capable of rebellion and murder, but held at arm’s length from the sanctified individual. Few contemporary viewers of the Marat would have failed to find parallels between this assassination and the regicide performed only three months earlier.

The letter, unsigned, speaks not only for Charlotte Corday, the fanatic bourgeois Girondiste who murdered the republic’s benefactor; it also speaks for the crowd of anonymous “unfortunates” who called on Marat’s aid, and who called, more vociferously, for the bloody execution of so many public officials. This very public dimension, introduced into Marat’s private bath, topples the authority of the heroic image. Anita Brookner writes that:

To appreciate its incredible power, one would not need to see the Marat in a museum… as an icon, an Ecce Homo, a Pietà or Deposition, but hanging in some kind of public tribunal, behind the speaker of the day, to impress upon him and his audience the extreme precariousness of his calling.

Brookner’s comment suggests that the painting does not canonize Marat at all, but rather calls into question the relationship of the hero and the crowd, a relationship I see figured in the tension between the head and the letter. What makes the painting radical is not its nominal hero, the dying Marat, but rather the idea that no single hero can respond to the demands of the public – or the open letter. Transcendence will never satisfy historical reality. The official representation, even if dictated by the most radical of revolutionary committees, will always be interrupted by unofficial voices, the voices of the “other.”
Introduction: the public letter

We see, for example, how the artist seeks to have the final word himself: ultimately the painting presents itself as a gift from the artist to the hero, from one man to another, in a moment which creates its own history: “A MARAT, DAVID - L’AN DEUX.” The roman capitals want to remain as aloof from the mob as the figure they salute. But the competing letter from the malheureuse interferes in this auto-referential myth-making.

Behind the art of David’s Marat stands “something other” which is volatile and public, but also private and female. When the artist seeks to smooth over the violent bloodbaths caused by the unholy mobs, he replaces them with the crime of a single woman. He then moves to recast the feminine intrusion by rewriting Charlotte Corday’s letter in his own hand. When the journalist Marat sends money to a grieving war widow (the banknotes pictured on the wooden writing-stand), he attempts a similar silencing: both these gestures aim to make violence intimate and personal, even as they point to public violence – assassination and war. The revised pietà that David creates, with Marat as the new martyr for humanity, implies a crucifixion, a public execution; but it gains its impact from the moment between mother and child (see fig. 4). Then, with the violence properly under sentimental wraps, the woman is erased: David removes the grieving, eloquent Madonna. We move from a public to a private, “feminized” moment, from which the woman herself has been removed. Only in the background of that vast, silent, blank wall can we perceive a crowd of women, marked by violence.

And that is why I have chosen to concentrate on the letter, rather than the hero-artist, in the literature of the period following the French Revolution. David’s painting offers a convenient example of how the volatile politics of the moment appropriated the strategies of the sentimental tradition. Politics walked through the private, domestic sphere and, dressed in feminine terms – La Liberte or La Guillotine – unleashed violence. At the same time, however, women writers used the familiar letter for entry to the world of politics: Charlotte Corday was not alone. In the mind of late eighteenth-century Europe, the letter fused the world of epistolary romance, the domestic tragedies of Clarissa or Julie, with the world of political revolution.

Politically charged letters in England and France appeared in innumerable pamphlets sold to the public under the guise of “An Open Letter to George III,” “A Letter to a Noble Lord” or, in the
Figure 4 Michaelangelo, Pietà.
Introduction: the public letter

In the case of the feminist Olympe de Gouges, a bold “Letter to Citizen Robespierre.” It is generally assumed that Manon de Roland penned the letter of protest to Louis XVI which resulted in the downfall of the Gironist ministry. And Helen Maria Williams’ Letters from France, published serially from 1790 to 1796, provided some of the most widely read pro-revolutionary propaganda in England. Even the debate between Edmund Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France and Thomas Paine’s Rights of Man was waged primarily in the form of letters sent back and forth between very public individuals. Despite his apology that “a different plan” might have been “more favourable to a commodious division and distribution of his matter,” Burke recognized the advantages of an “epistolary fiction” for circulating his less-than-private Reflections.16 In the struggle over symbols, both pro- and counter-revolutionary groups recognized the value of the letter: the French monarchy’s lettre de cachet, the hidden letter of absolute law, became a symbol of tyranny, in contrast to the “open letter,” symbol of representative government and evidence of a tolerant, equitable system of justice—and of communication.

The letter had, in fact, become a phenomenally useful political tool, available to anyone with a pen. Politics provided the fuel for the incendiary letters peasants sent to oppressive landlords and magistrates, a terrorist tactic common during this period which became more pronounced in years of extreme class tension. Political activity was the cause and effect of the letters of the London Correspondence Society, founded in 1792 as the first working-man’s political organization in England, and outlawed by 1794 as a treasonous conspiracy. When letters carry the seeds of organized rebellion or “conspiracy,” we discover les liaisons dangereuses inside and outside the realm of sentimental romance.

A crucial change occurs at this time: the political force always latent in, or extracted from the letter of fiction, takes over the public image of the letter. When the disturbing power of the letter comes to the fore, as it does in Marat Assassiné, it not only challenges the formal order of “official art,” but, more radically, suggests turbulence beneath the surface. The letter in Romanticism hints at a correspondence between public and private experience, and that correspondence continually revises—and disrupts—fixed images or narratives. What the individual writes, the masses read; experience is translated from the private to the public domain, and back again. The woman and the mob are co-respondents in the realm of social
upheaval; both are figures for the suppressed voice of the other which challenges the official word. As the letter of Marat Assassiné indicates, the figure of the letter subverts the deferential language which would substantiate the heroic individual and his transcendental status; it moves outside of static representation in its appeal to history, mortality and the public. The disorienting tilt of the letter communicates to its audience a message from the oppressed, the malheurées: a message of social inequities, of bloody uprisings, fanaticism, violence. It challenges, and stands above the exchange of immortality between public artists and public officials. It interrupts canonization.

This book attempts first to revise the familiar fiction of the letter in literature and, second, to demonstrate how the sentimental fiction of letters disguises, in part, a revolutionary politics. This fiction dresses the letter in feminine robes and scrutinizes the private spaces, the physical and emotional vulnerability, that such robes shape and define. We accept too readily the notion that the letter allows us a window into the intimate, and usually feminine, self. Feminists have celebrated the letter as a form of expression which validates female experience, a form which allows unregulated fluctuations of thought and feeling at the same time that it documents the minutiae of domestic life. Conversely, feminist scholars have read the letters of epistolary fiction as emblems of a social trap, which either locks the woman into marriage (as in Pamela) or betrays her into death (as in Clarissa or Julie). Recent studies of epistolary writing by feminists lament that “the one genre with which women have been persistently connected has specialized in narrowing the range of possible inflections for feminine expression.” Patricia Meyer Spacks, while discussing the power strategies which fuel the letters of Jane Austen’s Lady Susan, nevertheless concludes that “however angry or despairing” epistolary fictions may be, they still “reinforced the status quo by assuming it.”

But other fictions of the letter are and have been available. Few scholars have studied letters as tools for political agitation or propaganda in a particular historical moment defined by revolution, reaction and Romanticism. Few ask why Marat Assassiné, for example, places the letter from his female assassin in the hand of the Revolution’s martyr. And few have contemplated the connection between Romanticism’s appeal to correspondence – from Edmund Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France, which originated “in a